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Book Reviews

The Birth and Infancy of Jesus Christ According to the Gospel Narratives. By REV. LOUIS MATTHEWS SWEET, M.A. With an Introduction by JAMES STEVENSON RIGGS, D.D. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1906. Pp. 365.

Mr. Sweet has written a thoroughly interesting book upon this much-discussed subject. His style is clear and vivacious; his reading has been wide; his temper is excellent, showing strength of conviction and, at the same time, a purpose to deal fairly with those who do not accept his conclusions. The book is not, however, the record of an investigation, in which the reader is invited to weigh the arguments on both sides and form his own conclusions. He frankly says: "My purpose is to set forth the grounds upon which I have reached the conclusion that the Infancy section [in the gospels] is a substantially accurate historical record." The whole book is keyed to this note. In developing his argument, however, he attempts to avoid appeals to purely dogmatic considerations, either those which relate to the incarnation, or the sinlessness of Jesus, or the inspiration of the writers of the gospels, and to build simply upon the strength of the testimony contained in the New Testament. Whether he succeeds in this attempt, or whether the supposed fact can be proved in this way, each reader of the book, and of the New Testament, must decide for himself. Perhaps the most satisfactory review of the book will be a brief examination of this historical evidence, as it appears in the New Testament and is discussed by our author.

It is admitted, in the first place, that the majority of the writers of the New Testament give no positive testimony to the doctrine of the miraculous conception of Jesus. If we possessed only the Second and Fourth Gospels, the Acts, the Epistles, and the Revelation, the belief that Jesus had a human mother but not a human father would not dawn upon our minds. Our author holds that Luke must have known this story early enough to have told it to Paul; that both Luke and Paul must have talked the matter over with James when they met him in Jerusalem (Acts 21:18); and that John could not have been ignorant of it. All this may be true; but if we are attempting to discover a historic fact by an appeal simply to testimony we cannot rest our argument upon such inferences. Mr. Sweet urges that the man who doubts or denies the doctrine which

he defends must not make too much of the argument from silence. Is it not just to reply, that the silence of these evangelists and apostles must not be regarded as giving consent to the doctrine? We must simply say that we have not their testimony, and we do not know how much they knew, or why they were silent.

Secondly, we have no evidence that Jesus had ever heard the story of his conception and the singular relation which his mother held with God. Our author says that Mary "could not tell the child Jesus of the wonders connected with his birth without incurring the risk of destroying the naturalness of his growth, and the simplicity of his self-consciousness." Perhaps not; but could she permit him to reach thirty years of age, and enter upon his ministry with the mistaken belief that he was Joseph's son? There is not a word in the teachings of Jesus, in his prayers, in his words to and about his mother, which suggests that he was acquainted with the story of the Annunciation, or the story of the angel's message to Joseph. Silence does not prove ignorance or disbelief; but Jesus cannot be summoned to give testimony to this doctrine.

If we are investigating this matter as historical students, seeking simply to discover a fact, all our evidence must be found in a few verses in the Third and First Gospels. How much real, first-hand testimony is there in these verses, and how conclusive is it?

So far as the Gospel of Luke is concerned, everything must be determined by the authenticity and the interpretation of one clause of four Greek words in Luke 1:34. Mr. Sweet is entirely right in affirming of Luke 1:35: "The verse by itself does not necessarily imply a virgin birth at all." "The verse simply implies that Mary's Child is, from the moment of His conception, to occupy a unique relationship to God." Again: "Nothing is said in that verse about a miraculous birth. The power of God is to overshadow Mary in her conception, but nothing is stated as to the mode of that conception." He is correct, also, in saying: "In answer to Mary's question as to how she could become a mother, still being a maiden, it implies that her child was to be born by the power of God, and that alone." True; but if this surprising and seemingly incongruous clause were not in her question, there would be no such implication. The story tells us that she was already betrothed. The message of the angel announcing the birth and the dignity of her son gives no suggestion that the man to whom she is betrothed is not to be his father. The humble maiden might well ask: "How will this be?" But how could she add, under such conditions, "since I know not a man?" As our author says, this chapter is not a simple, prosaic narrative of what

happened and what was said; but is recast in poetic and dramatic form. Is it not probable that the unknown author who wrote this drama, or some copyist or redactor, inserted this one jarring note? The fact that the prolific writer who wrote the gospel and the Acts says no more of the mode of Jesus' conception (unless it be in the doubtful and ambiguous clause in Luke 3:23), but always refers to Jesus as the son of Joseph and Mary, confirms the view that these words are not original, or do not justify the inference which has been drawn from them. The words might stand, in a dramatic poem, to express the startled surprise and confusion of the maiden, and be ignored by the angel in his reply; the thirty-fifth verse thus bearing the interpretation which Mr. Sweet says would be natural except for Mary's question.

The author feels confident that the story of the Annunciation, in substance, though not in form, came from Mary herself. There is no real evidence of this, for Luke 2:19, 51, do not affirm or even imply it. She is, as Mr. Sweet says, the only competent witness. But if she did tell the story of an exalted experience and a divine revelation, which anticipated the birth of her child, we have no evidence that the poet, who wrote these verses, fully understood or exactly preserved her words or her thought.

The story of the announcement to Joseph (Matt. 1:18-25), is fuller and more definite. The writer of those verses, in their present form, certainly believed that Joseph was not the father of Mary's firstborn son. But, as historical students, freed from the control of the dogma that the writers of the New Testament could not err in a historical statement, can we accept the testimony of this unknown writer as convincing in so strange a matter? Mr. Sweet thinks that this story came from Joseph, but was worked over into a catechism. If Joseph really told the story of Jesus' birth, and of thoughts and feelings which swayed him when he was expecting this child who developed so strange and impressive a character, can we be sure that those who retold his story preserved it in its integrity? Moreover, if we accept the story in Luke with its usual interpretation, we are compelled to believe that the young woman pledged to him in marriage and her elderly kinswoman kept Mary's condition a profound secret from her betrothed husband. Is that probable? Would it be right?

Our author makes short work with those who think that the first form of this story may have been modeled after the stories of annunciations to Abram and Sarai, to Manoah and his wife, and to Zacharias and Elizabeth; and that through repetition this story might develop into the story as preserved in Matthew's Gospel. Doubtless he would admit that such a story as was told of the birth of Isaac, or Samson, or Samuel, or John,

would in reality be accepted by Jewish Christians, if told of the conception of Jesus. Jesus' conception would have been by divine power, even if Joseph was the husband of Mary and the father of her child. And if a thoroughly Hebraic writing, the Gospel according to the Hebrews, can make Jesus speak of "My mother, the Holy Spirit," without denying that Mary was his mother, so could the Holy Spirit be thought of as the active principle of his conception, though Joseph was his father. Is it unreasonable or contrary to historical analogy or probability to suggest that so thoroughly spiritual a belief developed, under influences which we cannot trace, into an ignoring, then a denial of Mary's husband's share in the life of her wonderful child?

We have tried to argue the question, as our author does, upon the grounds of the testimony given and its trustworthiness, and to neglect all questions of profit or loss in seeking the truth. But, really, does it not add to the significance of Jesus in our Christian faith if we can believe that his holy birth and life gave new sanctity to marriage and fatherhood, as well as to a singular and unparalleled motherhood?

WILLIAM H. RYDER

ANDOVER, MASS.

An American Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah. By PROFESSOR CHARLES RUFUS BROWN, D.D. Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1907. Pp. xxxvi + 256.

The Book of Jeremiah is long and as a whole monotonous and without clear and definite arrangement of contents, and thus presents not an easy or inspiring task for the commentator. Professor Brown has acquitted himself well in his undertaking. He has made diligent use of his predecessors and produced a most useful and helpful book. The original version has been studied with great care and the commentary while clearly primarily designed for English readers will be useful for the student of Hebrew.

A new translation is given rendering the abundant poetical sections in metrical form. All departures from the present Hebrew text, to restore the original through the use of the ancient versions or conjecture, are indicated by heavy type, and all glosses or insertions by an ingenious system of lines interrupting the text. Thus a clear and satisfactory idea of the original utterances of Jeremiah is given. A very full table of contents with dates of the deliverance and the publication and annotation of each section reveal also most clearly the character of the Book of Jeremiah.